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Reagan Names FBI's Webster as CIA Director

President Takes Steps To Repair Damage Of Iran-Contra Affair

By Lou Cannon
Washington Post Staff Writer

President Reagan announced yesterday that he will nominate FBI Director William H. Webster as his director of central intelligence, an action that White House officials said was part of a swift-moving effort to repair some of the damage caused by the Iran-contra affair.

The 62-year-old Webster, who has headed the Federal Bureau of Investigation for the past nine years, was selected a day after acting Central Intelligence Agency director Robert M. Gates withdrew his name from nomination rather than risk a Senate battle over his nomination. In a statement the president said "Bill Webster will bring remarkable depth and breadth of experience, as well as an outstanding record of achievement to this position."

White House sources said that Reagan had planned to announce the choice himself, as part of a campaign to demonstrate that he is acting rapidly to rebuild his administration and restore his credibility. But Webster, who was offered the job by Reagan in a 10:20 a.m. telephone call, did not call back to accept it until 6:04 p.m., prompting a hasty announcement in the White House briefing room by spokesman Marlin Fitzwater in time for the evening network news broadcasts.

Sources said that White House chief of staff Howard H. Baker Jr. and national security adviser Frank C. Carlucci had determined earlier in the day that Reagan should demonstrate his "engagement" in the business of government by making his first appearance in the White House briefing room since Nov. 25, when Attorney General Edwin Meese III announced the diversion of Iran arms sales proceeds to the aid the contras fighting the government of Nicaragua.

Baker and Carlucci had expected Webster to call back by early afternoon, in time for Reagan to make the announcement. When he didn't, the sources said, Reagan was sent out in the briefing room anyway to welcome a Soviet arms control announcement. On Saturday Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev announced that he would no longer link an agreement to remove intermediate-range missiles from Europe to other arms agreements.

Fitzwater had read a statement similar to Reagan's to reporters a day earlier.

Sources said that Carlucci and Baker had quickly settled on Webster in their recommendations to the president after former senator John G. Tower (R-Tex.), who chaired the special review board that sharply criticized presidential performance in the Iran-contra affair, said he was not interested in the job. Unlike most recent CIA directors, Webster has no foreign policy experience but he is believed by Reagan's senior advisers to be a popular political choice for an agency whose credibility has been severely questioneed.

A joint statement issued by Senate Select Committtee on Intelligence Chairman David L. Boren (D-Okla.) and ranking Republican William S. Cohen (Maine) called Webster "a good choice" and said he is "widely respected both for his high standards of personal integrity as well as for his professional ability."

This was the response Baker and Carlucci had anticipated when they recommended Webster. A senior White House official referred to Webster as "Mr. Clean" and said he was "a tough-minded individual who won't let the professionals in the agency run rings around him."

But Cohen said the new nominee would undergo the same thorough examination of his record and questioning that had been planned for Gates. Cohen said that one question the committee will want to explore is a 26-day delay of an FBI investigation into arms shipments to the contras.

Acting on the request of the then-national security adviser, Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, Meese last Oct. 20 obtained from Webster an agreement to delay an FBI investigation into arms shipments. Cohen said he was confident that Webster would have "an adequate response."

If confirmed, Webster is considered likely to insist that CIA operations respect U.S. legal standards. He was a strong opponent in the administration in 1984 of a proposal to establish teams to conduct preemptive attacks against terrorists.

"These arguments were advanced in Vietnam and have caused us problems ever since," Webster said then in an unusual public statement. "We're big enough and strong enough to play by our own rules. We cannot do things that in later, more sober time will appear reprehensible."

Sources said that Webster last year opposed a covert action "finding" that authorized the CIA in certain instances to kidnap known terrorists and bring them to the United States for trial.

Webster's tenure at the FBI has been marked by unusually good relations with the CIA. When Webster was appointed in 1978, the CIA director was Stansfield Turner, a former classmate at Amherst College. Webster also had good relations with William J. Casey, who was CIA director throughout the Reagan administration until he resigned early this year after surgery for a brain tumor.

Webster's nomination was praised yesterday by Senate Majority Leader Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.), who had been critical of Gates. In contrast, Byrd called Webster "a highly regarded professional who will bring much-needed credibility to the CIA."

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Potential successors to Webster include former deputy attorney general D. Lowell Jensen, now a federal judge in California. Other possible candidates outside the FBI are Stephen S. Trott, the associate attorney general, Joseph E. diGenova, U.S. attorney here, and Rudolph W. Giuliani, U.S. attorney in Manhattan. FBI insiders named as possible candidates are executive assistant directors Oliver B. Revell and John E. Otto.

One Justice Department official said last night that the administration will have considerably more latitude in choosing a successor to Webster now than it would have had in 1988 because of the difficulty of winning Senate confirmation of a conservative in an election year.

Webster's selection occurred after a day in which the White House had sought, in a series of statements and actions, to give the impression of an administration rebounding from a scandal that has sent Reagan's standing plummeting in public opinion polls. The president will address the nation on national television tonight to respond to the Tower commission report, which found that the Iran initiative was a trade of arms for American hostages in contradiction to Reagan's previous statements on the issue.

The report criticized Reagan both for the initiative and for "faulty" management.

Meeting with the National Security Council staff yesterday morning, Reagan attempted to show that he was taking the Tower commission report to heart as he had promised. The president endorsed reforms recommended by the Tower board, many of which were undertaken by Carlucci before the report was issued last Thursday.

Fitzwater quoted Reagan as saying to the staff, "Views must be fully aired. Agency participation should not be shortcut . . . . I want the range of options developed for my consideration. Legal issues must addressed head-on and the rule of law respected. And of course, recommendations and decisions must be properly documented. Good order is necessary for developing good policies."

In statements since the report was issued members of the Tower commission have deplored the absence of records and conflicting recollections of leading members of the administration, including the president. After giving different versions of what happened, Reagan told the Tower board in a letter that he could not remember when he had first authorized the Iran arms sales.

Staff writers Bob Woodward, Helen Dewar and Mary Thornton contributed to this report.

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